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ABSTRACT

Bias in mass communication can be defined as interpretation based on factors that are independent of the original information, or as shaping the meaning of information according to the context in which it is placed. Although research has explored the concept of bias from a number of perspectives, its subtle manifestations can be understood best by a careful study of media in different cultures. The importance of the person or nation involved in the event, the intensity or magnitude of an event, and even the designation of an occurrence as newsworthy, are factors determined largely by the culture of the journalist. Cross-cultural comparisons offer different patterns in the kinds of images and the types of stories that are juxtaposed, and these same comparisons clarify the level of newsworthiness required of an event in a particular culture to merit general communication. (HAI)

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Media Bias: Context, Redundancy, and Critical Threshold as Cultural Factor

for
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Background

One of the major problems of mass communication which scholars have been studying for a long time is "bias." The term "bias," in the sense in which I am using it, should not be understood to have necessarily a negative connotation. I am using it rather in the sense of consistent deviations or differences in what is transmitted or meanings communicated by the mass media which can be attributed to factors that are independent of the original information. Bias is an important problem for those of us who are concerned with citizens constructing useful worlds in their heads--valid bodies of information. It is a problem that has been studied in a variety of ways.

Scholars have considered such manifestations of bias as the presence or absence of particular kinds of information, differences in the probability of various kinds of information appearing or being given prominence, differences in the frequency with which different kinds of information appear, the amount of space or time devoted to different sides of an issue or to different candidates, the use of positive or negative words and phrases when referring to a person or issue, the prominence given different kinds of information in newscasts or newspapers through placement.

Scholars have also been concerned with the causes of bias or the processes by which bias comes about. Most of this research has focussed on gatekeepers and the factors that affect the probability of their transmitting, shaping, or blocking various types of information. Such factors have been examined as attitudes or values of the gatekeepers, their definition of news or their "news values," the symbiotic relationship that develops between professional gatekeepers and the sources of news, the social press of the profession, the policies of one's superiors or the

organization, pressure groups, the behaviors of one's competitors, the size of the news hole in newspapers or the length of newscasts, and government controls.

To a lesser extent, there has been study of the media themselves, the particular characteristics of each medium which make different kinds of information "fit" better and, hence, more likely to be used in that medium; or which result in different kinds of "shaping" of the information. As an example, some theorists have discussed the obvious fact that television favors visualizable news events or aspects of events while radio and newspapers favor the verbalizable events or aspects. Other theorists talk about the different "rhythms" of the media which affect the way in which they shape information--the once-a-day rhythm of newspapers, the two to six-times-a-day rhythm of television news, and the hourly rhythm of radio news or, in some cases, the almost constant beat or hum of the "all news" station.

There are some claims that most, if not all of these various biases and their causes are culture-bound. As Ben Bagdikian (1974, p. 124) puts it, "the obvious fact [is] that the news media everywhere reflect the dominant values of society." To date, there have been few cross-cultural comparisons designed to test those claims. We keep talking about the need for such comparisons in order to discover the extent to which generalizations based on data gathered in Western nations hold up, but all of the talk has been followed by surprisingly little research.

The purpose of this paper is not simply to suggest again that such research be done, though I believe it should be. My purpose, rather, is to suggest that there are some far more subtle manifestations of bias in the media of any society that can best be understood--perhaps only

be understood--by cross-cultural comparisons. These biases or shapings of messages are due to differences in the relative redundancy of various types of information, in the contexts in which information is embedded, and the "critical threshold" at which an event becomes "news" in the media systems of different cultures. These are sources of bias which are more difficult than those I mentioned earlier for receivers to perceive and, hence, more difficult to guard against. I will discuss one of them at a time, explaining the theoretical rationale for the claim that it shapes our perceptions of the information to which we are exposed and why we can observe its operation best by cross-cultural comparisons of mass communication.

A Reconceptualization of "Message"

Underlying my argument is the vast body of evidence that we have, both direct and indirect, that the mass media (1) play a major role in shaping the world in each of our heads, but (2) that any one message in the media tends to contribute only trivially to that shaping. The message of the Arab-Israeli conflict that each of us has in his head, for example, was shaped only slightly by any single newspaper story, television news item, film, or magazine article; it was shaped, rather, by many stories, items, films, and articles, along with interpersonal communication. Hence, persons in mass communication ought to conceive of "message" not as a single story, but rather as that set of relevant information increments made available by the mass media in a community over some given period of time. It is from that set of increments that each of us grasps some sub-set with which he constructs his own version of the message--whether it is that message of the Middle East conflict, the message of women, the message of nuclear disarmament, or the message

of the role of violence in our societies.

If we can accept this conception of message, at least for our present purposes, we can turn to a consideration of redundancy, context, and critical threshold as biasing factors in the mass media.

Redundancy

One of the features of most modern systems of mass communication is their great amount of redundancy. Any individual, in the normal course of his existence in a modern society, is exposed to some increments of information again and again and again. The repetitive symbol may well be the most distinctive sign of our times, what with the xerox machine, high speed printers, audio and video recorders, and other devices for rapid duplication of material. We see the giant Marlboro man on billboards again and again as we drive across the country; we see the television commercial with Mrs. Olson saving a marriage with her coffee-making advice so many times that she becomes a national celebrity; and we hear "Convoy" and other such pop tunes on the radio again and again and again --and yet again. Not only do we have innumerable stimuli of these kinds which seem to recur endlessly, we get some which develop quickly, assault our senses repeatedly and intensively, and then disappear. For example, when Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald after the John Kennedy assassination, the film of the shooting was shown repeatedly on television newscasts and specials for a 24 to 48 hour period and, because interest in the event was high, many individuals attended carefully to it many of those times.

Not only do we have redundancy in exposure to the same stimulus and redundancy in exposure to the mass-produced carbon copies, we also have redundancy of particular elements of some stimuli, even though other elements vary. Thus, for example, we have the so-called genre films or television programs--the western, the private eye, etc.--in which the

conventions are so set and the inhibitions against their violation so strong that there is little of surprise value in most of them.

The amount of redundancy has an important impact on that world in our heads. One biologist, for example, using the model of evolution, has concluded that redundancy has an effect even when one does not recall his prior exposure. He suggests that "the man who once knew a datum, but has forgotten it now, is different from the man who never knew it." This generalization is supported by the experimental comparisons of re-learning vs. initial learning.

Herbert Krugman (1971, p. 490), who studied the impact of television advertising, has generalized about the effects of redundancy of material with which those who are exposed repeatedly have little involvement. He indicates that, as "trivia are repeatedly learned and repeatedly forgotten and repeatedly learned a little more . . . the structure of our perception" of an object or ideas can alter, sometimes through alteration of the relative salience of the attributes emphasized in the material to which we were exposed. Since we tend not to be very involved with much of the material from the mass media to which we are exposed, especially material from radio and television, the processes of learning without involvement are important. Although Krugman and others use the term "trivia" to describe those information increments which people sense in this way, I want to stress that we should not equate lack of involvement with lack of importance.

The reason that redundancy is a factor in media bias is that frequency of appearance of different kinds of material in the media is not a chance matter. Within any one society, some kinds of material have a much higher probability than others of being transmitted repeatedly through the media;

and the same kinds of material do not have the same relative probabilities in different societies. The most obvious contrast in the United States is the relatively high frequency with which many kinds of commercial advertisements appear in our communication environment and the relatively low frequency with which most serious news stories appear. Less obvious, but at least as important, is the fact that some kinds of news stories will be repeated often while other kinds will seldom be repeated. For example, after the first astronaut set foot on the moon, we were literally bombarded with the story; we saw that foot come off the step of the landing craft innumerable times and we heard and read those words, "a small step for man; a giant leap for mankind," even more often than we saw Mr. Whipple squeeze the Charmin--at least for a week or two. On the other hand, the more recent story that scientists for the first time have made a gene that works normally in a living cell was repeated relatively little in the media, even though the potential impact on the world of the latter event is far greater.

I could also mention the relative redundancy of political stories, economic stories, crime stories, and stories of natural disasters. An examination of which stories about a political candidate or issue are repeated often and which are repeated only infrequently if at all can be revealing.

A cross-cultural comparison of the relative redundancy of transmission by the mass media of different kinds of stories will help to illumine the role of culture in media bias, about which we have many claims but little evidence.

Context

If culture has as much influence on our values and our behaviors as

most of us assume, that influence should be manifested in the ways in which we organize our worlds, the phenomena which we tend to associate with each other and the ways in which we tend to associate them. In the mass media, this process should be manifested in the ways in which gatekeepers group stories in newspapers or newscasts and, at a finer level, in the kinds of information which they group within individual stories.

That these different kinds of groupings--the different contexts for a story or for some set of information increments--result in different perceptions of the story or increments is clear from a variety of studies and theories.

One of the most interesting of these theoretical ideas was developed by the German dramatist and dramatic theorist, Bertoldt Brecht (1964). He termed it the "alienation effect." There are various interpretations of what Brecht meant by that term. At least one of his meanings relates to the effect of context. It is that when an event is juxtaposed with another event that, under other circumstances, would be construed as contradictory, observers are jarred out of their usual pattern of perceiving the event. Brecht used this device in the theatre to prevent the audience from becoming lost in the imaginary world of the play and to get them to think about the political ideas for which the play was a metaphor.

A playwright, director, or actor can use the alienation effect to add depth or complexity to the character which an audience perceives. When an actor's lines and his behaviors are highly consistent, we have what is termed stereotyped acting; everything is predictable and we perceive a simple, readily recognizable character. On the other hand, when an actor's

lines and his behaviors are not consistent, we perceive more subtle characteristics and a more interesting and complex character.

Another kind of contextual effect that has been studied that is relevant to the present discussion is that resulting from film or television editing. Since the earliest days of motion pictures, when the Russian film-makers Pudovkin and Kuleshov were experimenting with the montage, we have been gathering evidence of the way in which one shot in a motion picture affects our perceptions of the adjacent shots. You probably recall Pudovkin and Kuleshov's famous "plate of soup" experiment. This was the experiment in which they edited similar closeups of a man's face which was relatively expressionless together with a closeup of a bowl of soup in one scene, with a dead woman in a coffin in another scene, and with a little girl playing with a teddy bear in the third scene. Pudovkin reported (1960, p. 168) that when audiences saw the three scenes they raved about the actor's artistry. "They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play." Only the filmmakers knew that the face was exactly the same in all scenes.

If time permitted, I could describe a wide variety of other studies and theoretical ideas from communication, visual perception, etc. which have demonstrated the effect of contextual stimuli.

On the basis of all of these studies and theories, we must conclude that the context of information to which one is exposed in the mass media shapes or "biases" his perceptions of that information. The stories or commercials surrounding a television newscast item shape our perceptions of that item. When we see a story about people starving in India followed

by a commercial for a drug to ease the discomfort caused by overeating, that message of India that we perceive is quite different than the one that would be perceived if the story were followed by a story about UNESCO or even one about an auto accident.

In the same way, within a story or coverage of an event, the shots that are juxtaposed interact to create new meanings which are more complicated than we would predict on the basis either of Gestalt theory or any of the consistency theories. For example, during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, when some of the bloodiest encounters between demonstraters and police were shown on television, some of the directors periodically cut back to convention hall to show Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley sitting placidly listening to the proceedings of the convention. The resultant interaction between those images of the demonstrations and the images of Daley resulted in far more grotesque perceptions of both than we would have had if each had been shown alone or in some other context.

We know, from observations of news practices, in the United States at least that when a newscaster or an editor decides to use one item in the newscast or newspaper, this choice tends to have some effect on the subsequent choices that he makes. For example, if one gets a good story about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, he will have a greater tendency to pick up and use another story relating to the Kennedys that he would otherwise overlook. Given the selection of almost any major story, the probabilities of other types of stories being deemed "newsworthy" by a journalist are altered. In a sense, each of these other stories or potential stories is considered in the context of the already selected story and, as a result, is perceived in a different way than it would be otherwise.

I am convinced that a careful study of the media in different cultures

will demonstrate that there are different patterns in the kinds of images and the kinds of stories that are juxtaposed and, hence, a different kind of bias operating. For example, if one were airing a story such as the one in the United States of Congressman Wayne Hayes and the prostitute he kept on the public payroll, we might find in one culture that it is likely to be followed by a story about a different manifestation of antisocial sexual behavior, in a second culture that it is likely to be followed by a story about a different type of corruption in government, and in a third culture by a story about a public official doing something good. These different kinds of biasing would provide information about the values of each culture that led to the grouping, the norms to which journalists are socialized in that culture, and about the values that are thereby reinforced in the audience.

To put this matter in another way, I am proposing a hypothesis which is analogous to that of Sapir and Whorf. However, whereas they attribute one's structure of thought to one's language, I am attributing it to the learning that has been shaped by one's culture. Thus, two journalists from different cultures, having selected or having had selected for them a story of an election in a third country, will tend to join it with different kinds of stories in the same newscast or on the same newspaper page.

Critical Threshold of Newsworthiness

Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (1965), in their study of the factors which affect the reporting of foreign news through the media, mention the concept of "threshold," the level of newsworthiness that an event needs to achieve in order to get into our general communication environment. This seems to me to be another potentially valuable variable

for studying the influence of culture on media bias. Though it seems at first a simpler concept than that of redundancy or context, it is a good deal more difficult to analyze systematically. The reason for the difficulty is the complexity of the set of factors that determine a threshold level. One of the factors is the context I discussed earlier--the other current stories or events competing for space and time and, even more critically, which form a background that alters one's perception of the newsworthiness of each other story considered. Some of the other factors which interact in the determination of newsworthiness and which might be differentially affected by the culture of a journalist are the relative "eliteness" of the persons or nations involved in an event, the intensity or magnitude of an event (number of people killed in a disaster, for example), or even whether an event is perceived as an event, as opposed to a condition or continuing or developing state. All of these factors affect what gets into the media and, hence, the bias of the media. To the extent that we find them to be operationally defined in different ways in different cultures we will have an explanation for some of the differences in the kinds of media bias found in those cultures.

Summary

For many years we have talked about and studied some of the ways in which the mass media shape the images of the world which they present to us. This has been important talk and study, for it has helped us learn to interpret information from the media in more valid ways. However, our understanding of these processes is still far from adequate. We need to move on toward the study of and theory development about some of the more subtle aspects of media bias, aspects which are far more difficult for receivers to perceive and take into account as they attempt to construct

useful images of reality. I believe that the ideas presented in this paper move us toward understanding just such aspects.

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